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Review

WOLF LESLAU and THOMAS L. KANE, *Amharic Cultural Reader*

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Reviews

በመሥራት ላይ ናቸው *bəzu səra särtäwall. ahunamm bä-mäsrat lay naččäw* ‘He has done many deeds. Now too He is doing’, በኛም ቀበሌ ሆነ በሌሎች ቀበሌዎች አልፎ አልፎ በገሀድ ተከሰቶአል ። እየተከሰተ ነው *bännamm qäbäle honä bäleločč qäbälewöčč alfo alfo bägähad takästoall. əyyä-täkässätä näw* ‘[This phenomenon] has manifested itself openly both in our neighbourhood and in other neighbourhoods. It is [still] manifesting itself’. In these two examples the progressive character of the action is still easily recognizable. But in the case of እየ *əyyä*, probably as a result of its frequent use, the progressive aspect is sometimes obliterated and what remains is the indication of an action performed at the time of speech, e.g. [to a question of speaker A if he wants to come to a football game speaker B answers]: አዎን ፥ በጣም ደስ እያለኝ ነው *awon, bätam däss əyy-aläññ näw* ‘yes, with pleasure’ (lit. very pleasure while it says-me is).

All that has been said above represents not more than a few marginal remarks taking into account the recent evolution of Amharic syntax, and it doesn’t impair in any way the value of the present book. We, students and researchers, are infinitely grateful to the Grand Old Man of Ethiopian linguistics for all he has written and is still writing in our domain. While such Ethiopian linguist of the senior generation toils on constructing his own legend for future generations and another spends all his energy in aggressively promoting a pale protégé, Wolf Leslau, altruistically, continues to publish books which will enrich our knowledge and help us in imparting it to others.

Olga Kapeliuk

WOLF LESLAU and THOMAS L. KANE, *Amharic Cultural Reader* = Aethiopistische Forschungen Bd. 53. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001. ix, 319 pp. Index. Price: Eur 39,–. ISBN: 3-447-04496-9.

Drawing from his inexhaustible files, after publishing most valuable material on Argobba¹ and Zway², Professor Wolf Leslau offers us now a collection of ethnographic texts in Amharic which he had commissioned from his Ethiopian students in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. The texts, which were composed with the double purpose “to give the advanced students of Amharic a sample of the Amharic writing style of the average educated Ethiopian and at

¹ Leslau, Wolf, *Ethiopic Documents: Argobba – Grammar and Dictionary*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997 (Aethiopistische Forschungen 47).

² Leslau, Wolf, *Zway – Ethiopic Documents: Grammar and Dictionary*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999 (Aethiopistische Forschungen 51).

the same time to provide information on Ethiopia's cultural background" (p. VII) only gained from the long delay between their composition and their printing. On the one hand, they describe in great detail a cultural reality which changed considerably during the last decades and in many aspects is no more as authentic as it used to be. On the other hand, it allowed the author to enlist, for the difficult task of translation, the collaboration of the deeply regretted Thomas L. Kane, his former student who, in W. Leslau's own words, "had an encyclopedic mind for things Ethiopic" and was "the greatest lexicographer of Amharic and Tigrinya" (p. IX). It is to his memory that the book is dedicated.

Thanks to the English translation, the ethnographic material, which depicts all the important aspects of the material and spiritual traditional culture of the Amharas, is made accessible to anthropologists. The publication of these essays now has something refreshing in itself, considering that since the fall of Haile Sellasie, Amharic language and culture lost much of their popularity with field researches, to be replaced by the study of other nationalities and minorities. Yet, systematic gathering of ethnographic information on the Amharas, as related by native speakers themselves, is not new. In *An Amharic Reader* by J. I. EADIE³ several pieces of this kind were included (pp. 75–96), whereas the important work *The Abyssinian at home* by C.H. WALKER⁴ consists entirely of oral testimonies (in English translation only) by native speakers of Amharic about their manners and customs. Wolf Leslau himself adopted a similar approach in collecting texts for his works on the living languages of Ethiopia, starting with his unequalled description of Tigrinya⁵ and later in most of his seminal books on the Gurage dialects and on Harari.

The Amharic texts provide a perfect teaching material for foreign students who are already familiar with the grammatical structure of the language. The vocabulary is extremely rich and diversified and the lexicon at the end of the book (pp. 200–287) will dispense them from perusing other dictionaries. As to the style of the essays, although it varies slightly according to different authors (19 students have contributed to the book), it is fluent and natural without being over-simplified or elementary. The sentences are neither too short and telegraphic, such as would probably be produced by a similar group of students nowadays, nor too elaborate and intricate, so characteristic of the style of professional writers. There is no doubt that the *Cultural Reader* will become an indispensable tool for teachers and students of Amharic.

³ Cambridge: University Press, 1924.

⁴ London: Sheldon Press, 1933.

⁵ Leslau, Wolf, *Documents tigrigna (Ethiopien septentrional) – grammaire et textes*. Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1941.

The texts contain some interesting points of grammar. Thus, for instance, given that the reading matter refers to customs, i.e. to what people generally do, without indicating a specific grammatical subject, there are many cases of impersonal constructions corresponding to English “one does”. Between the two ways of rendering impersonal constructions in Amharic, namely by an active verb in the 3rd person plural or by a passive verb in the 3rd person singular, it is the second one which is by far the most frequent in these texts. It is even extended to intransitive verbs producing such examples as: **ወዲያውኑ አይጮኹም** (p. 16/6) “there is no immediate outcry” (lit. immediately it is not cried); **የክት ልብስ ይወጣል** (p. 28/6) “the Sunday clothes are taken out” (lit. the Sunday clothe[s] is being gone out); **ወደ ባለ ሥልጣን ቤት ሲከድ** (p. 30/8) “when one goes to an official’s house” (lit. when to [of] official house it is being gone). This construction is explained in an entirely innovative paragraph in W. LESLAU’s *Reference Grammar* (p. 465–467) which should be studied together with the reading material of the *Reader*.

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ANNEGRET MARX, *Katalog der Äthiopienabteilung*, Museum Haus Völker und Kulturen, Sankt Augustin: Eigenverlag, Mai 2001. 222 Seiten, zahlreiche Abbildungen, zwei Karten und Zeittafel. Preis: Eur 30,12. ISBN: 3-00-007924-6.

Für die Äthiopienabteilung des in Fachkreisen, aber auch weit darüber hinaus bekannten Museums “Haus der Völker und Kulturen” in St. Augustin bei Bonn vom vor gut 125 Jahren in den Niederlanden gegründeten Steyler Missionsorden hat die Autorin einen Katalog geschaffen, der weit über das hinausgeht, was allgemein als “Katalog”, d.h. als eine Zusammenstellung von Objekten mit Beschreibung bezeichnet wird.

Die Publikation verweist ausdrücklich auf die 1995 erfolgte Neuaufstellung der Äthiopien-Abteilung, mit der die Bedeutung der äthiopischen Kirche für die gesamte Christenheit kenntlich gemacht werden soll. Äthiopien ist schließlich seit der Mitte des 4. Jahrhunderts christlich und somit der drittälteste christliche Staat der Erde. Davon ausgehend führt die Autorin mit Text und Bild in die alte, d.h. afrikanisch-christliche Kulturgeschichte des Landes ein. Sie stellt in den ersten Kapiteln klar die enge Verwobenheit der Religion mit dem gesamten Lebenslauf des äthiopischen Menschen dar. Einige Ungenauigkeiten trüben dabei das Bild nicht.

“Äthiopien hat dabei einen eigenen Weg eingeschlagen, in dem sich christliche, jüdische (mediterrane) und heidnische (afrikanische) Ele-